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## ***Hannibal Goes to Rome* as an Example of How Antiquity Is Received in New Media**

**Abstract:** The main aim of the article is to demonstrate how the comic book *Hannibal Goes to Rome* creates a new narrative of the Second Punic War by relating to both the ancient literature and modern pop culture and also show the presence of ancient culture in modern-day pop culture.

**Key words:** Hannibal, Second Punic War, reception, webcomic, Brendan McGinley

*Hannibal Goes to Rome* is a webcomic published online since 2008, written by Brendan McGinley, drawn by Mauro Vargas and coloured by Andres Carranza. It is available at the following address: <http://www.shadowlineonline.com/webcomics/hannibal-goes-to-rome> on Shadowline platform that specialises in publishing graphic novels and webcomics. At present it consists of 12 parts unevenly divided into pages (first part was 22 pages long, part three consisted of 6 pages), part 12 is now being created and as of now is only 2 pages long.

In terms of the outline the comic resembles a booklet, which is characteristic of American comic book culture. Also, at the end of each part there is a preview of future adventures. Although the comic tells a story of Hannibal heading for Rome (where, as we know, he never arrived, stopping three miles away from the City in 211 BC), it begins with a short introduction to the conflict between Rome and Carthage and the First Punic War. It allows the readers without historical background and not *in medias res* to follow the story, at the same time avoiding the need for simplification.

A webcomic by definition is either published on the Internet, or premieres online and only later is published in traditional form. The first comics of this type appeared in 1995; Polish Webcomic Centre was operating until last year. The Internet is a type of new media defined as “many various forms of electronic communication, which are possible due to the use of computer technology, using such electronic forms of publication as CD-ROM, DVD, digital TV and above all the Internet. [...] The term contrasts new media with ‘old’ forms like printed newspapers and magazines which are a static representation of text and graphics.”<sup>1</sup>

Because *Hannibal Goes to Rome* operates through new media it is free, widely and instantly available, the readers can be up to date with how the story develops, they do not have to wait for the publication of the new volume until the story is complete. They may also become patrons and support the creators, who accept payments via credit cards or Pay-Pal.

The term “comic book” may not sound very serious or even be seen as belittling, which was observed by Krzysztof Teodor Toeplitz in his *Sztuka komiksu. Próba definicji nowego gatunku artystycznego* (1985) [The Art of Comics. An Attempt at Definition of a New Artistic Genre]. According to popular belief, comic books are light-hearted picture stories, an opinion completely unfounded if one considers such canonical works as those of Will Eisner, Craig Thompson or Art Spiegelman, whose *Maus* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. That is why a term “graphic novel” has been in use for some time now. Professor Jerzy Szyłak of the University of Gdańsk is the most well known comic book specialist and theoretician in Poland and an author of three books, absolute “musts” for every enthusiast of the subject: *Poetyka komiksu* [Comics Poetics], *Komiks w literaturze ikonicznej XX wieku* [Comics in the Iconic Literature of the 20th Century] and *Komiks: świat przerysowany* [Comics: A World Overdrawn], all published by słowo/obraz terytoria publishing house. In the interview with Sebastian Frąckiewicz, a journalist for *Polityka* magazine, who specialises in comics culture, which was published in a book called *Wyjście z getta. Rozmowy o kulturze komiksowej w Polsce*, Jerzy Szyłak quotes older definitions (by Toeplitz after Toussaint) and says that “a comic book is a language [a language phenomenon] that consists of pictures [iconic signs], which means that the message of a comic book ought to be treated as a collection of sentences which aim to communicate something and be studied like a system analogical to a language system. It is the pictures that are the carriers of language content and as such they should be analysed.”<sup>2</sup>

So far the only comics revolving around ancient history were: the Asterix series, a tongue-in-cheek and almost impossible to get comic book by a classi-

<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/definicje\\_PLK\\_HTML.htm?id=POJ-6111.htm](http://www.stat.gov.pl/gus/definicje_PLK_HTML.htm?id=POJ-6111.htm).

<sup>2</sup> S. Frąckiewicz: *Wyjście z getta. Rozmowy o kulturze komiksowej w Polsce*. Warszawa 2012, p. 341.

cal scholar Jerzy Ciechanowicz (and Barbara Milewska) about the adventures of two Romans *Impluvius et Compluvius apud Sarmatas*, Frank Miller's 300 later adapted for the cinema by Zack Snyder and recently published three volumes of *Pour l'empire* by Bastien Vivès and Merwan, eight volumes of *Murena* by Philippe Delaby and Jean Dufaux or the two volumes of *Les Aigles de Rome* by Enrico Marini. The last three mentioned comic books are set in the times of the Roman Empire.

The Barcids were the subject of a comic book only once – French writers Michel Suro and Simon Rocca had probably been planning a whole series but it ended up to be first and only volume published in 1996, titled *Barca, t. 1: L'otage d'Hamilcar*. Brendan McGinley himself started drawing a series called *Citizen X*, most probably in 2009, fantasizing about what the world would look like if Carthage had won the Second Punic War. Unfortunately, this look on alternative history also thought-out as a webcomic was cancelled after just two volumes.

The story of Hannibal was the topic of several books (*Salammô* by Flaubert excluded, as it refers to earlier times, the war with mercenaries) and, as far as I know, of four films – from the silent *Cabiria* of 1914 to Italian *Annibale* of 1959.

The way Hannibal is presented in *Hannibal Goes to Rome* was not inspired by any of his images known to us now. The appearance of the Carthaginian is a widely discussed subject. One may suspect that it is his image that appears on Punic coins from the 3rd century, however, the scholars are not certain whether it is Hannibal or god Melquart, or Hannibal as Melquart.<sup>3</sup> In the comic this fact is referred to in one of the scenes in part 7 where we see enormous Hannibal, resting on the Alpine peaks, who is spoken to by a diminished and visibly scared Roman soldier saying: “you look much shorter on y-y-your coins” (part 7, page 3).

Other known images of Hannibal are the bust of Volubilis which in Picard's opinion is the original from 3rd century BC;<sup>4</sup> marble bust found in 17th century in Naples showing Hannibal in his exile years (often presented on covers of books on Hannibal); marble bust found in 16th century, at present in Prado Museum. An 18th-century painting by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo at present to be seen in Vienna is an artistic interpretation of Hannibal's image, one that can be found on the cover of Dexter Hoyos's *Hannibal's Dynasty*. Such an interpretation is also the statue of Hannibal to be found in gardens nearby Louvre. And let us not forget the cinema. In 1959 *Annibale* the title character was played by Victor Mature. The Carthaginian also featured in already mentioned 1914 silent movie called *Cabiria*, in *Scipione l'Africano* of 1937 and in *Jupiter's Darling* of 1955.

<sup>3</sup> G. Charles-Picard: *Hannibal*. Warszawa 1971, pp. 67–68; G. Picard: “Hannibal hegemon hellénistique.” *RSA* 1983–1984, vol. 13–14, p. 77; L. Villaronga: *Las monedas hispano-cartaginesas*. Barcelona 1973, pp. 48–51.

<sup>4</sup> G. Charles-Picard: *Hannibal*..., pp. 80–83.

Hannibal from *Hannibal Goes to Rome* does not display characteristics typical for Hellenistic coins, his hair is longer, straight and pitch black, tied with a band, his face is rather slim than round. According to tradition, he wears an eye patch after losing an eye while crossing the Apennines, the eyepatch is consistently worn over his left eye except the cover picture, where it is on the right. It is an interesting issue and one not often discussed by ancient authors, most of whom just mention the loss of an eye – Livy is just one example.<sup>5</sup> Cornelius Nepos is more precise and mentions the right eye.<sup>6</sup> Thus the lost left eye in the comic might just be an original idea of the creators.

Hannibal is presented as a good strategist and leader (part 5, page 13), fighting with the Romans with Livian *suis artibus*: “own tricks” – in one of the illustrations he is dressed as an old man in order to mislead the Celts (part 10, page 1). The historians inform us that Hannibal not only changed his clothes but also wigs.<sup>7</sup> Page 21 of part 11 shows a reaction of deceived and angry Fabius Maximus when he tried to stop Punic army in Callicula valley in Campania.<sup>8</sup> Hannibal ordered to fix oxen’s horns with torches which set ablaze misled the Roman army and helped Hannibal escape the trap. It is also worth noting how the pictures present Hannibal as *cruentus* – bloody, blood-stained but also bloodthirsty, which corresponds with ancient ways of portraying the Carthaginian (part 2, page 7). The motif of blood will also be found in the illustration of battle of Lake Trasimene, where apart from the proverbial sea of blood one can see bloody clouds, one of which is shaped like a skull (part 10, pages 11–12). I cannot wait to see the presentation of the battle of Cannae and its motif of the river Aufidus overflowing with blood.

The authors of the comic have an interesting approach to the story connected with a vow taken by Hannibal. According to ancient historians Hamilcar before heading for Spain forced his son, who was only nine at the time, to swear that he will never be friends with the Romans. In Nepos’s relation of the event Hannibal apparently emphasizes his young age saying *puerulo me*.<sup>9</sup> Silius Italicus goes one step further and paints a horrific picture – in his vision a spontaneous combustion of the altar occurs and this is accompanied by the creaks and squeaks of hinges in the temple of Elissa, its threshold is stained with blood, the ground is pounding and an infernal whizz cuts into the darkness, the marble face of Elissa is sweating.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile in the comic (part 1, page 6) young Hannibal remains quite stoic, he indifferently agrees with his father, after all he will soon be a moody teenager loathing everything (“sure, I’ll be a teenager soon and hate everything anyway”).

<sup>5</sup> Liv. 22, 2, 11: *altero oculo*.

<sup>6</sup> Nep., *Hann.*, 4, 3: [...] *postea numquam dextro aequae bene usus sit*.

<sup>7</sup> Liv. 22, 1, 4; Polyb. 3, 78; App., *Annib.*, 21–22. See also P. Krafft: “Hannibals Perücken. Motivik und Erzählstruktur von Livius 22, 1.” *RhM* 2007, vol. 150, pp. 67–88.

<sup>8</sup> S. Lancel: *Hannibal*. Warszawa 2001, p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> Nep., *Hann.*, 2, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Sil., *Pun.*, 1, 90–100.

A recurring motif in the comic is what may be seen as Hannibal's motto: "we will either find a way or make one," showing his determination (part 3, page 5; part 6, page 9, and also part 10, page 4).

The Carthaginian is also presented as a man of culture – after crossing the Alps, seeing Italy at his feet he welcomes it ("Hello, Italy") and adds: "please allow me to introduce myself" (part 6, pages 11–12). The English verb "to introduce" evokes the Latin *introducere*, which means "to present someone formally, to make known" but also can be used in a military context meaning "to bring in."

Drawings presenting the Romans (part 8) are partly black and white, which brings to mind the climate of horror films. It stands in stark contrast to pictures of smiling Punic elephants and clearly shows where authors' sympathy lies. On the first page of part 8 the Roman army is presented in such a way that an association with SS troops is imminent (not only because of the style of helmets they are wearing). Muscular, black and white Sempronius is wearing a red coat while his bulging muscles and varicose veins make him look like one of American comic book heroes – Hulk (part 8, page 2).

The authors themselves claim that they aim their story to be humorous as well as educational.<sup>11</sup> I would go as far as to say that it shows great erudition, too. Let us look at just one example. Apart from quoting the canonical Livy's story about future Scipio the African (in the comic shown as a skinny teenager with protruding teeth) rescuing his father during the battle at the river Ticinus in 218 the authors also quote the version of Coelius Antipater (which of course can also be found in Livy<sup>12</sup>) where the father was rescued by a Ligurian slave. From the author's commentary we learn that because Coelius's work is lost they decided to print the legend – "so let's print the legend" (part 7, page 9). This shows the choice of source material – the authors of the comic did not base their work solely on some kind of Hannibal compendium. There are references to Nepos: Silenos, a Greek teacher and annalist appears in part 4 (page 3), to Silius Italicus: in part one (page 6) they introduce Imilce – Hannibal's Spanish wife from the fourth book of *Punica*, or to stories about signs of doom scattered across Livy's third decade, visible especially in the depictions of the beginning of the war (part 9, page 9). Such signs are a rain of stones, lightnings, animals stealing a sword, a baby crying out loud *Io triumphe* and a cow jumping off the third floor.<sup>13</sup> There is also a reference to a sacrifice made of the Greeks. Another example could be a transformation of a known *timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*<sup>14</sup> (part 5, page 13), when Silenos warns Hannibal he says: "beware of Gauls bearing gifts, sir" thus replacing the Greeks from the famous saying. It must be noted, however, that chronologically the Sec-

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<sup>11</sup> "Told in a humorous (yet educational) manner": <http://www.brendanmcginley.com/hannibal-goes-to-rome/>.

<sup>12</sup> Liv. 21, 46, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Liv. 21, 62, 2. A baby and a cow are *prodigia* of 218 BC.

<sup>14</sup> Verg., *Aen.*, 2, 49.

ond Punic War took place before *Aeneis* was written, but after the mythological Trojan War.

Humour, on the other hand, can be seen in all the minute details, from puns and jokes about the language to amusing associations. For example, during a struggle with the Romans Hannibal asks: “anyone got a Latin dictionary?” (part 1, page 5), which is even funnier because in the comic the Romans do speak Latin occasionally, which is additionally highlighted by the use of red font, more often, however, they speak something Latin-like. There are plenty of references to popular culture: to computer games (high score: part 7, page 8), it also makes fun of the comic’s own style: there is a soldier reading “fumetti,” which in Italian means “a comic book” (part 11, page 4). Hannibal himself appears as a hero on a film poster (part 6, page 1) and his name is listed as a member of a mock cast of a film alongside the names of the authors (“starring: Hannibal Barca, Hasdrubal Barca, Mago Barca, Hanno Bomilcar, Publius Scipio, Publius Scipio Africanus and Cyrus the elephant. Directed by Mauro Vargas, presented in photocolour by Andres Carranza, script by Brendan McGinley”). In another scene the Carthaginian quotes the Rolling Stones: “I can’t get no satisfaction,” or enquires about the *Cosa Nostra*. Examples of puns include referring to soldiers from Sardinia as sardines (part 7, page 8), whereas pop culture references are plentiful when we look at minor characters of the comic: Ligurians are shown as zombie, ninja and a pirate (part 2, page 3), Carpetani feature as vampires covering themselves with coats, a clear reference to the classic *Dracula* (1931) with Bela Lugosi in the title role (part 2, page 4). The spies encountered on the Celts’ territory evoke the image of agent Smith from *Matrix* by Lana and Andy Wachowski (part 5, page 6). Hannibal and his companions riding a horse are portrayed with the setting sun in the background (part 1, page 7), which brings to mind the four riders of the Apocalypse (who may symbolise the plagues of the last days: the war, the famine and premature death), however, the setting sun may also be reminiscent of the picture which always ended the adventures of Lucky Luke (the setting sun and a rider on a horse are also inherent in westerns). The only difference in my opinion is that the sun setting behind the characters of the comic is probably supposed to indicate the direction they are headed: for Italy (the east) from Spain (the west).

A much more serious association is Hannibal riding elephants from a 16th century fresco called *Hannibal Crossing the Alps* by Jacopo Ripanda, which can be seen in so called Sala di Annibale in Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome. The version presented on page 4 in part 10 is shown en face, whereas in the fresco we can see him from the side, and although different in details the similarity lies in the general colour scheme – grey and pink.

The comic so far tells the story until the year 217. One may aim a complete analysis once the series has been finished, but even now it is clearly visible that it brings a lot of joy to both the authors and the readers, which is not that common when it comes to ancient history. The medium of a comic book is similar to that

of a film – it is not only the story that counts, the graphic representation is equally important. That is why it is so fascinating to see how the picture painted by ancient authors by means of words, in the 21st century has been artistically transformed into a narrative accessible and enjoyable for those who read it through pop culture as well as those who take great joy in tracking down high culture references and have an opportunity to employ their expert knowledge of literature, history and history of art. If antiquity was to be present in modern day culture at a level on a par with that presented by this webcomic, we can only look forward to next publications of this type.